Attu, A Lost Village of the Aleutians

By Rachel Mason

Four tiny, remote Aleutian villages were left behind forever during World War II: Makushin, Kashega, Biorka, and Attu. After the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor, the U.S. government evacuated the Unangan (Aleut) residents of the Aleutian Islands and brought them to camps in Southeast Alaska, ostensibly for their own protection. At the end of the war the residents of the smallest villages, their numbers further diminished by death and hospitalization, returned to the Aleutians but were not permitted to return to their homes. Instead, they were settled in other Unangan communities.

The residents of Attu, the most remote Aleutian village, had a different and especially tragic wartime experience. They were taken by the Japanese in 1942 and held prisoner in Otaru, on Hokkaido, for the duration of the war. Almost half of them died, many from malnutrition and starvation. When the survivors returned from Japan, they were not allowed to go back to Attu, but were taken to the village of Atka (*Figure 2*).

Lost Villages of the Aleutians, a project of the Aleutian-World War II National Historical Area, began as a small-scale history of the former villages, documented through oral history interviews and secondary sources. It became more participatory and collaborative when it grew to include boat trips to revisit each village with elderly former residents and their descendants. In 2009 and 2010 the project chartered the US Fish & Wildlife Service research vessel *Tiglax̂* to bring elders and their descendants to the sites of Makushin, Kashega, and Biorka. The journeys gave participants a chance to see the places they remembered or had heard about, and to honor the memories of those who once lived there. The project's final boat trip will be to Attu, tentatively planned for the summer of 2012. The NPS is also helping former Attu resident Nick Golodoff, who was six years old when he and his family were taken to Japan, compile and edit his memoir, *Attu Boy*.

Figure 1. Digging the hole for the cross. Left to right: Carlene Arnold, Brian Rankin, Billy Pepper, Fred Lekanoff, Eva Kudrin, Alexandra Gutierrez, and Irene McGlashin (behind the house where the alter in the church once was).

The Attuans'wartime displacement took them not to U.S. soil but to Hokkaido Island in Japan. Attu is one of the "Near" Islands, meaning that it is closest to Russia and Asia; however, at the time of World War II it was the furthest human settlement from the Alaska mainland. Because it was so remote, it was visited only once or twice a year by priests, traders, or Coast Guard revenue cutters bringing mail and medical providers.

There is still a mystique to Attu. There is more interest in revisiting Attu than any of the other lost villages, except among the few remaining people who once lived there (*Figure 3*). Since the war, most of the surviving residents have been reluctant to talk about or reflect upon their painful experience. Of the three Attuans left, siblings Nick Golodoff, Greg Golodoff, and Elizabeth Kudrin, only Nick has been interested in publicly telling his story. Nick, the oldest, is the only one with clear memories of those years.

For years Nick Golodoff has been writing a book about his experiences in Japan, *Attu Boy*, with the help of his granddaughter Brenda Maly. The resulting book weaves Nick's memories with other first-person accounts by Nick's mother Olean Prokopieff, his uncle Innokenty Golodoff, and fellow Attuans Mike Lukanin and Alex Prossoff. All are now deceased.

In addition to these personal narratives, several other sources provide information about the Attuans' World War II experiences. Japanese author Masami Sugiyama, inspired by the pictures a military photographer took in Attu in 1942, interviewed surviving Attuans as well as Japanese who had known them in Otaru (*Sugiyama 1984*). Henry Stewart, an American anthropologist living in Japan, wrote a report and an article based mainly on the diaries and records of Japanese soldiers, guards, and medical personnel (*Stewart 1978, 2008*). Mary Breu's 2009 book about her great-aunt Etta Jones offers another perspective. Etta was the school teacher on Attu, and her husband Foster Jones was killed during the Japanese invasion. Like the Unangan residents, Etta Jones was taken to Japan, but she was interned in a different part of the country. From these and the other accounts available, we can piece together Attu's World War II story (*Figures 4-5*).

In the early morning of June 7, 1942, radio operator Foster Jones sent his usual weather report from Attu. A group of Japanese soldiers came into the village on foot later in the morning. The attack surprised the Attuans as they left church (*Carter 1994*). The Japanese were yelling and shooting, and one woman was wounded in the leg by rifle fire. Six men ran away to the hills and hid there all day (*Golodoff 1966*). Later the Japanese sent other Attu men to bring them back. Nick Golodoff, a little boy of six, remembered hiding in a barabara, a traditional sod house.

The soldiers gathered the Unangan residents in the schoolhouse. They killed Foster Jones, and one of the Attu men was ordered to bury him. The Japanese announced that the Unangan were liberated from the American oppressors. After the soldiers ransacked the houses, looking for guns, the Attuans were allowed to return to their homes.

The next morning, the villagers were assembled at the flagpole, and the Japanese raised their flag. Later some

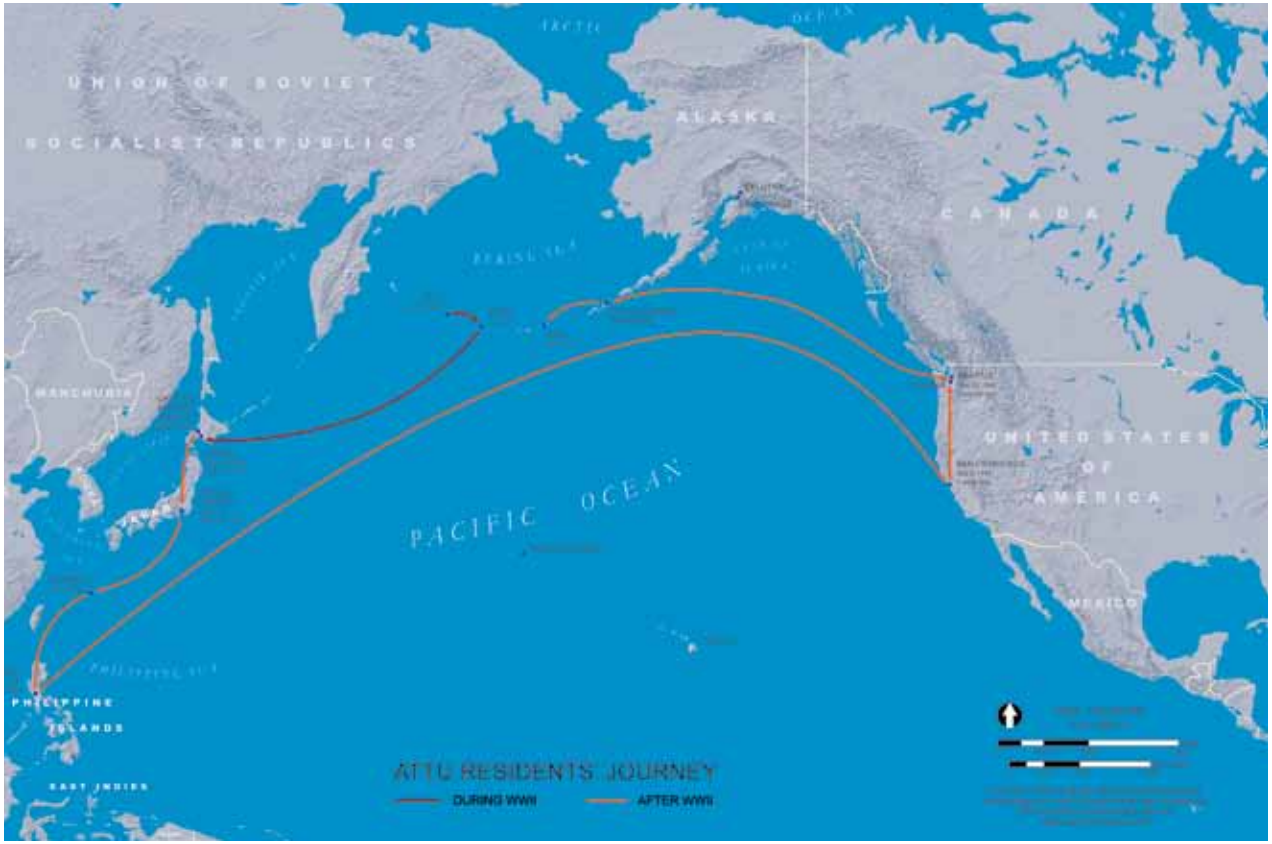

Figure 2. Attuans' journeys during and after WWII.

Nick Golodoff, age 9 in 1945:

"As the end of the war approached, we were still in Japan. The policeman told us the war was over and we painted POW on the outside of our building so the American planes would know where we were. The planes flew over and looked around and saw it, and then the next day they came back with drums filled with food, all kinds of food, and they dropped the drums from the plane with a parachute. Their aim was not very good. Some drums filled with food fell into one of the Japanese houses and the policeman had to go and collect them... [W]e ate well that day. Everything tasted good to me. I really liked the canned peaches."

of the Attuans covertly mocked it, calling it the "Japanese meatball." One of them stole the American flag back and hid it from the Japanese. The Japanese roped off the houses of the village, more to discourage the Japanese soldiers from bothering or stealing from the Attuans than to keep the Attuans inside (*Carter 1994*).

The soldiers guarded the villagers for three months on Attu before they took them to Japan. During that time the elderly John Artumonoff died. The Attuans found it difficult to fish, hunt, or collect firewood, because they had to get permission from the Japanese every time they went out in a boat. If they caught any fish, the Japanese confiscated most of them.

One of the Japanese officers wrote in his diary that the chief's son "Little Mike" accompanied them on mountain hikes and boat rides, and often played the guitar and accordion for them (*Stewart 1978*). Other children, including Nick Golodoff, also befriended the Japanese during these weeks in the summer of 1942 (*Figures 6-7*).

The villagers boarded a ship on September 14, 1942. The soldiers told them to bring food, blankets, and even furniture, perhaps with the idea that their move to Japan might be permanent. The trip to Japan took about two weeks. Anecia Prokopioff, an older woman, died on board ship, and she was buried at sea. At Kiska, the Attuans were transferred to another ship, where their quarters were in a cargo hold that had been used to carry coal (*Kohlhoff 1995*). When they finally arrived at the city of Otaru, on Hokkaido Island, the passengers were very dirty from coal dust (*Carter 1994*).

The Attuans' first house in Otaru was a vacant railroad employee dormitory. They lived on the second floor, storing their furniture and belongings at the rear of the building (*Stewart 2008*). In addition to the hardship of internment, it must have been a big culture shock to live in a city. Otaru's population in 1942 was around 120,000. Once part of Ainu territory, Otaru is now a Japanese and Russian tourist destination (*Irish 2009*).

At first the Attuans were able to supplement their rations with food they had brought. Innokenty Golodoff remembered that at first the food was slightly meager, and included rice, bread, radishes, and a little fish. For about

a year, he had a Japanese girlfriend who was a nurse and brought him extra food. When their own food was gone, the Attuans began to starve and suffer from malnutrition. They rarely got any fruits or vegetables. They could see that their Japanese guards were hungry too (*Golodoff 1966*).

In addition to the lack of food, many of the Attuans already had tuberculosis before they arrived in Japan. Their health deteriorated in Otaru. Several died from beriberi, a disease of malnutrition, perhaps caused by a diet almost entirely made up of white rice. Chief Mike Hodikoff and his son George both died of food poisoning in 1945 from eating rotten garbage (*Kohlhoff 1995*).

The Attu residents worked digging clay from a pit mine in Otaru. Although they were supposed to be paid 1-1/2 yen per day, they were not paid at the time. Upon their release, the Attuans were given about $700 in yen to take back to the United States. Unfortunately, this money was appropriated by U.S. officials and American money never given to the workers (*Stewart 2008*).

In 1944 the 29 Attuans still living were moved from the dormitory to a larger house, which had once been the quarters for Shinto priests (*Stewart 2008*). Their new home was far from the clay pits, and they didn't work after that. Their declining health may have also prevented them from working.

The Attuans communicated with the Japanese in English, and spoke Unangam Tunuu among themselves. Nick Golodoff remembered that the Japanese often wrote notes in English to convey orders or questions. Attuans who spoke English served as interpreters (*Jolis 1994*). A Japanese linguist, Ken Hattori, visited them in 1943 and recorded their language.

The Unangan internees remembered mistreatment by some of the guards. One woman went for three days without food and water, and had to shovel snow in her bare feet, as punishment for shouting at one of the officers after her daughter died (*Lukanin 1988, Prossoff 1988*). Japanese sources, too, acknowledge that the Attuans sometimes suffered at the hands of their guards (*Stewart 2008*).

At least one of their captors became their friend: Mr. Shikanai, the policeman who lived with them in both of their houses in Otaru. On Christmas Eve in 1944, Shikanai obtained goat meat and turkey for a party, and the Unangan played the accordion and danced into the night (*Kohlhoff 1995*). After the war was over, while waiting for an American Army plane to take the Attuans back to the U.S., they had a sake drinking party with Shikanai (*Golodoff 1966*).

Nick Golodoff remembers the day Mr. Shikanai told the Attuans the war was over. The Attuans painted the letters "POW" on the roof of their building so the American planes would know where they were. Planes flew over, dropping drums filled with delicious food. Nick particularly remembered the canned peaches they dropped, and said that he still loves canned peaches.

Some Japanese guards recalled that the Attuans shared some of the food and cigarettes with them, in defiance of American orders. Two weeks later they started the journey back to America. Police officer Shikanai accompanied the Attuans as far as an air base outside of Tokyo (*Stewart 1978*).

Photograph courtesy of Nick Golodoff

Figure 3. While the Japanese occupied Attu, a military photographer took this picture of six-year-old Nick Golodoff on a soldier's back. In 1992 Nick visited Japan and was able to meet that soldier again. He was photographed carrying the soldier, Mr. Kanami.

Photograph courtesy UAA archives

Figure 4. Fred Schroeder, a storekeeper and trader, lived in Attu for part of each year, where he would buy fox furs from villagers. He helped the Attuans pay for construction of their new church by advancing lumber against their season's trapping. Schroeder's wife never visited the island, but every year she sent a dress to each woman , along with toys for the children (*May 1936*).

Photograph courtesy Aleutian-Pribilof Island Association

Figure 5. The Coast Guard was devoting special attention to Attu because Japanese fishing vessels were suspected in the area. In May 1942, the seaplane tender *Casco* asked Attu chief Mike Hodikoff to show the officers good landing spots near Attu.

List of Attuans who died during internment in Japan compiled from Murray 2005. Forty people came to Otaru, but only 24 left. Twenty-one people died, including four of the five babies born while they were in Japan. The main hardship of internment in Japan was the lack of healthful food.

Artumonoff, John – b. 1882, d. 1942 on Attu

Artumonoff, Mavra – b. 1924, d. 1944

Artumonoff, Peter – b. 1920, d. 1944

Borenin, Annie Golodoff – b. 1919, d. 1943

Golodoff, Artelion "Arty" (Angelina's baby) b. and d. 1943

Golodoff, Harman (Garman) – b. 1888, d. 1945

Golodoff, Helen – b. 1929, d. 1944

Golodoff, Lavrenti – b. 1900, d. 1945

Golodoff, Leonti – b. 1931, d. 1943

Golodoff, Mary – b. 1895, d. 1943

Golodoff, Michael (Julia's baby) b. and d. 1943

Golodoff, Valvigian (Valirjian) – b. 1939 , d. 1943

Hodikoff, Anecia (Mike H.'s baby) b. and d. 1943

Hodikoff, Fred (Fedosay) – b. 1901, d. 1945

Hodikoff, George – b. 1929, d. 1945

Hodikoff, Michael Gorga "Mike" (Chief) – b. 1893, d. 1945

Lokanin, Gabriel (Mike L.'s baby) b. and d. 1944

Lokanin, Tatiana – b. 1941, d. 1944

Prokopioff, Anecia Kriukov (Golodoff) – b. 1886, d. 1942 enroute to Japan

Prokopioff, Mary – b. 1929, d. 1943

Prossoff, Bladimir – b. 1932, d. 1943

Prossoff, Martha Hodikoff – b. 1903, d. 1943

Figure 8.

The Attuans were given the cremated remains of those who had died in Japan, and they put all the boxes of bones of those who had died together in a big box (*Lokanin 1988*). Unfortunately, the bones were left in Okinawa on the way back to the United States (*Prossoff 1988*). The box of remains was eventually recovered and buried in Atka.

The Attuans flew on their first plane when leaving Japan. From Manila, they boarded a ship and set out for San Francisco. It took 10 or 11 days, Nick Golodoff remembers, but it seemed forever until they went under the Golden Gate Bridge. Red Cross workers met the boat and took the Attuans to a hotel, giving them money for lodging and clothing. They walked around and explored San Francisco for over a week.

They took a train to Seattle; some were left at the tuberculosis hospital in Tacoma (*Prossoff 1988*). They attended services at a Russian Orthodox church. Nick Golodoff remembers learning to ride a bicycle and picking up golf balls for money at a golf course—things he would never have done at Attu or Atka.

The remaining Attuans finally boarded a military barge to return to the Aleutians and arrived in Atka on December 21, 1945 (*Lokanin 1988*). They had hoped to return to Attu, but were told they had to go to Atka instead because there were not enough people to resettle Attu. Sixteen survivors were dropped off in Atka.

The Atkans had not yet recovered from their own wartime displacement. They were in the process of rebuilding their village, which the U.S. Army had burned after the residents were evacuated to Southeast Alaska in 1942. The Attuans had to stay with Atka families until the military could build houses for them. Fortunately, Nick Golodoff's mother was from Atka, so she and her children were able to stay with their relatives. Later his mother married an Atka man. Other Attu survivors married Atka residents and began raising new families.

The resettlement in Atka did not go entirely smoothly. The Attuans were unhappy that they could not return to their village, and did not always feel welcome in Atka. One consequence of the move to Atka was the increased rivalry in basketry between the villages. The Attuans and Atkans had different basket-weaving styles and kept them secret from each other. The Attuan women no longer had access to their own favorite kind of grass, nor did they know the Atka women's secret gathering locations (*Shapsnikoff and Hudson 1974*). The Attuan style, previously known as the finest Unangan basketry, died out with the Attuan women.

The Attuans' first-person accounts of internment in Japan differ in details, as would be expected in remembering traumatic events decades earlier. Japanese and American accounts are filtered through the wartime climate of loyalty to one side or another. Nick Golodoff's child's-eye version of events omits any wartime feeling of Americans versus Japanese, whereas Unangan adults included more patriotic statements. Similarly, Nick Golodoff does not recall hostility between Attuans and Atkans after his family was resettled there. He is a loyal Atka resident and almost always wears a hat that says "Atka" on it.

The Unangan accounts often include the phrase "We were told…" Whether by the U.S. government, traders, or Japanese soldiers; the Attuans were accustomed to being told what to do. The omissions in adults' memories, and reluctance to talk about the years of interment, appear to be a defense mechanism against reliving the painful events. Some former residents were willing to tell about life in Attu before the war, but refused to talk about their traumatic experiences in Japan. Nick Golodoff (*Figure 8*) has a unique perspective, and his forthcoming memoir, Attu Boy, will be the fullest account yet published of the Attuans' experience in Japan.

Photograph courtesy Aleutian-Pribilof Island Association

Figure 6. Japanese soldier with one of the children on Attu, 1942.

Photograph courtesy Aleutian-Pribilof Island Association

Figure 7. Alex and Elizabeth Prossoff, wearing the numbers issued by the Japanese military. During the Japanese invasion of Attu, Nick Golodoff hid with this couple in a barabara (sod house).

Photograph courtesy Brenda Maly

Figure 8. Nick in Atka.

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